The Evolution of the National Park Service: A Hundred Years of Changing Ideas

Compiled by David Harmon and Rebecca Conard

In this year of celebrating the centennial of the National Park Service, and assessing how far the agency has come, it is worth reflecting upon how different the world of 1916 was compared with ours today. The passage of the Organic Act must have been a barely discernable ripple to a country that was in the midst of the first modern global cataclysm, "the war to end all wars." In 1916, Jim Crow ruled the South, eugenics was considered state-of-the-art social planning, ecology as a science was in its adolescence, American Indians were thought to be on the cusp of assimilation or total destruction, and most American families did not own an automobile or a telephone. Of course, much remains the same, too; and even in the face of pervasive climatic and demographic change no one is quite yet ready to abandon the foundational goal of preserving the national parks unimpaired in perpetuity. So it would seem that the ideal which animated Olmsted and Mather and Albright is durable, even if it now appears more aspirational than practicable.

To serve that steadfast ideal within a changing society, the Park Service has had to evolve: to take on board a host of new ideas in a never-ending process of adaptation. Here, we offer a sketch of some of the key waypoints in that evolution. Presented are short excerpts from the writings of a variety of thinkers and practitioners, accompanied by a brief explanation of their context. We originally conceived of this as a timeline, but came to realize that representing every important event in NPS history in chronological order would require far more space than is available. Instead, we have grouped them (sometimes loosely) under four thematic headings:

- *Directives*—words of instruction and inspiration to and from NPS leaders;
- *Course Correction*s—major decisions that resulted in a fundamental change in policy, or

The George Wright Forum, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 230–251 (2016).
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how the agency views itself, or both;
- *Provocations*—"creative disruptions" that helped move NPS to a new philosophical place; and
- *Visions*—serious thinking about the future … the very opposite of the all-too-ubiquitous Internet "hot take."

We make no pretense of completeness—not every important shift in NPS history is represented.

The primary contribution of the George Wright Society to the NPS hundredth anniversary has been the Centennial Essay Series. The last installment comes in this issue with the contribution by Denis P. Galvin, and the series will formally wrap up in December with a retrospective from Dwight T. Pitcaithley and Rolf Diamant. These 27 essays, we hope, have added some new ideas to the constellation that has been built up since 1916. The National Park Service's mission is rooted in action, but it draws sustenance from a parallel life of ideas. Nurturing that life continues to be an important part of what the George Wright Society does.

DIRECTIVES

Setting course: The Lane Letter (1918)

Once the Organic Act was secured, the first step was for the new agency to set up shop: hire employees, establish offices, buy equipment. That "constructive work" took about a year and a half. Next, it was time to state a set of basic policies to carry out—or, perhaps, sort out—its twin preservation and enjoyment mandates. As historian Richard West Sellars explains, Horace Albright drafted the policies, which, after review, were presented to Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane, who turned around and published them in the form of a May 13, 1918, letter to Stephen Mather, the first NPS director—what has come to be known as the "Lane Letter."

Mather and Albright enjoyed an exceptionally close working relationship, and it's safe to assume that the Lane Letter reflects their collective thinking. The new agency would be anchored on three basic principles:

> First that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our own time; second, that they are set apart for the use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people; and third, that the national interest must dictate all decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks.

The addition of the intensifier "absolutely"—the Organic Act doesn't include it—points us toward a preservation-trumps-use interpretation of the mission. So does the next sentence of the Lane Letter. "Every activity of the Service is subordinate to the duties imposed upon it to faithfully preserve the parks for posterity in essentially their natural state."

It all seems very straightforward. But the Organic Act also includes a long, never-quoted list of actions the director is allowed to take that, by today's standards at least, contradict any notion of non-impairment: cattle (but not sheep) grazing, timber cutting, and the "de-

struction" of any animal or plant that may be detrimental to the use of the parks. The Lane Letter tightens some of these (cattle should be grazed "in isolated regions not frequented by visitors," any timber cut should be used for park buildings or to improve vistas) but of course could not countermand the new law. In that, the Lane Letter was just the first in a long series of recalibrations, still ongoing, of the basic contradictions enshrined in the ambiguous central sentence of the Organic Act: "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Looking beyond boundaries: Stewart L. Udall (1964)

Almost a half-century later, another summation of purpose was sent to a newly appointed director from the secretary of the interior. This one, from Secretary Stewart L. Udall to Director George B. Hartzog, Jr., emphasized a basic principle that had slowly dawned on the agency over the years: parks are not islands.

By the mid-1960s, America's population was rapidly growing, demand for recreation climbing, and understanding of the interconnectedness of environmental problems deepening. A savvy and effective secretary, Udall realized "that effective management of the National Park System will not be achieved by programs that look only within the parks without respect to the pressures, the influences, and the needs beyond park boundaries." While the primary concern of NPS will always be the resources directly under its care, its responsibilities "cannot be achieved solely within the boundaries of the areas it administers."

> The Service has an equal obligation to stand as a vital, vigorous, effective force in the cause of preserving the total environment of our Nation. The concept of the total environment includes not only the land, but also the water and the air, the past as well as the present, the useful as well as the beautiful, the wonders of man as well as the wonders of nature, the urban environment as well as the natural landscape. I am pleased that among its contributions, the Service is identifying National Historic and Natural History Landmarks throughout the country and is cooperating in the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Udall's call-out of some of NPS's external, cooperative programs is indicative of a national policy shift toward comprehensive approaches to cultural and natural heritage, soon to be expressed in such landmark laws as the Wilderness Act (1964), the National Historic Preservation Act (1966), and the National Environmental Policy Act (1968).

Flexible commitments: *A Call to Action* (2011)

The centerpiece statement of NPS under the directorship of Jonathan B. Jarvis, the *Call to Action* is "a call to all National Park Service employees and partners to commit to actions that advance the Service toward a shared vision for [the centennial in] 2016 and our second century." This collegial tone, with the implied emphasis on the agency's work being a calling as well as a duty, is interesting in itself. It also differs markedly from the Lane and Udall letters in expressing forceful agencywide commitments while embracing a decentralized approach.

> The implementation strategy emphasizes *choice*.... Program managers and superintendents will select actions that best fit the purpose of their program or park, workforce capacity, and skills, and that generate excitement among employees.... *Flexibility* and *creativity* are encouraged. The plan identifies what to accomplish, but allows employees and partners to determine how to achieve the objectives through innovative strategies and approaches.

NPS has always had trouble balancing central-office priorities with the realities of day-to-day operations in the field—a legacy of the early days, when many of its parks were truly remote. In the *Call to Action* autonomy is treated as a positive virtue, but even so the heart of the plan is stated as a series of imperatives:

> In our second century, the *National Park Service must recommit to the exemplary stewardship and public enjoyment of these places.* We must promote the contributions that national parks and programs make to create jobs, strengthen local economies, and support ecosystem services. We must use the collective power of the parks, our historic preservation programs, and community assistance programs to expand our contributions to society in the next century.

This collective resolve is to be put to work to achieve four goals: connecting people to the parks, strengthening NPS's role as an educator, preserving the parks, and improving organizational performance. The dedication to achievement is unequivocal:

> ... *we will* fully represent our nation's ethnically and culturally diverse communities. To achieve the promise of democracy, *we will* create and deliver activities, programs, and services that honor, examine, and interpret America's complex heritage. By investing in the preservation, interpretation, and restoration of the parks and by extending the benefits of conservation to communities, the *National Park Service will* inspire a "more perfect union," offering renewed hope to each generation of Americans.

No doubt these commitments will be tested in the years to come.

COURSE CORRECTIONS

Embracing the past: The Historic Sites Act (1935)

In a major agency-building coup, in 1933 Director Horace Albright persuaded President Franklin D. Roosevelt to reassign the historic sites and monuments then under the Agriculture and War departments to the National Park Service. As Jerry L. Rogers relates, there were other ideas percolating within the New Deal for using emergency employment to bolster historic preservation—not just on public lands, but throughout the country—but there was no statutory authority to back them up. The Historic Sites Act of 1935 filled that bill, and declared for the first time "that it is a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States."

The law, Rogers notes, was "wonderfully broad" in what it allowed the government to involve itself in. NPS, under the authority of the secretary of the interior, could:

- Secure, collate, and preserve drawings, plans, photographs, and other data of historic and archaeologic sites, buildings, and objects.
- Make a survey of historic and archaeologic sites, buildings, and objects for the purpose of determining which possess exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States.
- Make necessary investigations and researches in the United States relating to particular sites, buildings, and objects to obtain true and accurate historical and archaeological facts and information concerning the same.

And much more: purchase and restore buildings, artifacts, and other property; erect monuments and markers; and operate sites themselves, either directly or by agreement with the states or other parties. The law also created what is now known as the National Park System Advisory Board, still going strong as a major consultative body for NPS.

As Rogers concludes, the Historic Sites Act was a capstone to "Albright's earlier brilliant vision of a national park system no longer confined to a few western states," helping "the young bureau to become national in scope as well as name."

Embracing the future: The decision to desegregate parks in the South (1939–1942)

Like many institutions in American society, the National Park Service has had a checkered history when it comes to race relations. The routine expulsion of Native Americans and others from newly created national parks is an obvious case in point. Less well-known is how the agency unofficially but firmly discouraged African Americans from visiting the parks during its early years. As the geographer Terence Young has shown, this practice went back at least as early as the 1922 superintendents' conference, where attendees decided that—Negroes being "conspicuous" and "objected to by other visitors"—"we cannot openly discriminate against them, [but] they should be told that the parks have no facilities for taking care of them."

At first, when most of the large destination parks were in remote areas of the West, such discrimination could be allowed to proceed fairly quietly since so few African Americans were in a position to visit them. But by the 1930s there was growing black middle class, and African Americans travelers of means were able to consult editions of *The Negro Motorist Green Book* for help in deciphering where they would (and wouldn't) be welcome, or even allowed, to eat, sleep, and shop. Also in the 1930s Mammoth Cave, Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains, and Shenandoah were all created in southern states where Jim Crow reigned. Because NPS had agreed to enforce state laws in other parks, they had to do the same in these new parks. That brought the issue to a head within the FDR administration, and caught the attention of Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes, who in 1939 convened a meeting on what to do. Taking notes, Associate NPS Director Arthur Demaray reported that Ickes wanted to split the difference in Shenandoah:

> ... we were to select one large picnic area, most conveniently located, and permit both races to use it. No signs indicating race segregation within the picnic grounds or in the comfort stations are to be permitted within this area. In all other picnic and campground areas in Shenandoah, signs are to indicate that they are for Negro and white visitors.

In these segregated areas, Ickes "also very emphatically stated that equal facilities must be provided Negro visitors, not in number but in quality." Tenuous though they were, these moves were a foothold in desegregating the new southern parks.

As Young writes, "This progressive change in policy might have continued to expand slowly over the next several years, but as with so many other social issues, World War II overwhelmed racial segregation in the national parks." The nation's leaders realized that they needed African Americans to fully support the war effort, and so had to pay attention to bolstering "Negro morale." This led to a series of directives culminating in one in June 1942 in which Director Newton Drury ordered the regional director responsible for the South "to make certain that the policy of the Department of the Interior on the non-segregation of Negroes is carried out in the southern areas administered by the National Park Service." Within a few years, official discrimination at park campgrounds and other facilities had been ended.

Embracing the future of the past: James Oliver Horton (2000)

A turning point in NPS interpretation came in 1999 when Congress (through language written by Representative Jesse L. Jackson, Jr.) ordered the agency to reassess its programs at Civil War battlefields to encourage interpreters to highlight "the unique role" that slavery played in causing the war. In response, NPS convened a symposium in 2000 to discuss how to do it.

Several eminent scholars addressed the gathering, making the case that NPS should boldly refocus its traditional battlefield interpretation, which emphasized military strategy and exploits, to the broader context of the war and its root cause: slavery. None did so more forcefully than the historian James Oliver Horton. Speaking to an audience of superintendents and other NPS employees, Horton was forthright:

> When you approach the notion of slavery as a cause of a war a hundred or more years ago, keep in mind that part of our past is not totally past. The Civil War was about slavery and as we discuss the Civil War we do so in a time that is all about race. Again, your job in talking to the public about these uncomfortable issues is not an enviable one. Yet, your job is critically important. National Park Service historians and interpreters will educate more people in the course of a month than I will in a lifetime. That makes what you do both difficult and vital.

A questioner asked Horton, "How do we incorporate broadly fashioned interpretive programs on the issue of slavery into our battlefield parks?" First of all, he replied, "we need to talk about the reason the battlefield existed in the first place," why people were willing to give their lives there. And "the answer to that leads directly to the issue of slavery." Not that

slavery needs to or can be interpreted the same at every Civil War park, but at every one of them it does need to be interpreted, regardless of how controversial or difficult that may be, because "the fact is that slavery was a central part of the Civil War."

> Now, we can make several decisions. We can say okay, it was but I am not talking about it. You can do that but you can't wish it away. It was there.... I think it is harder to rationalize not including the entire story, because sooner or later somebody is going to ask you a really embarrassing question. The fact is that slavery was there. Slavery was important. You have the responsibility of interpreting the history, and since slavery is so much an important part of that history, it becomes part of your responsibility.

Coming out of the symposium, NPS leadership, both in the Washington headquarters and in the parks, accepted the responsibility—a remarkable turnaround.

A new vision of stewardship: Revisiting Leopold (2012)

The 1963 Leopold Report is widely credited as a landmark in NPS history for being the first policy statement that advocated management of natural areas in the parks on ecosystem principles. Its core recommendation was that "the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man. A national park should represent a vignette of primitive America."

The report also made numerous specific scientific research and resource management recommendations, but as the end of the 20th century drew near it was apparent that progress toward carrying these out had been fitful at best. That was the conclusion of a 1992 review by the National Research Council, which went on to call for a legislative mandate for science research in the parks. In 1997, the publication of Richard West Sellars' *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* further propelled the conversation forward, and helped inspire the Natural Resource Challenge and its ramping up of NPS scientific capacity.

In 2012, acting on a request from Director Jarvis, the Science Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board produced *Revisiting Leopold: Resource Stewardship in the National Parks,* a report that offered "general and conceptual answers" to three linked questions: what should be the goals of NPS resource management, what policies are needed to achieve the goals, and what actions are needed to carry out the policies: in sum, what should park stewardship look like "during a time of unrelenting change"?

> Environmental changes confronting the National Park System are widespread, complex, accelerating, and volatile. These include biodiversity loss, climate change, habitat fragmentation, land use change, groundwater removal, invasive species, overdevelopment, and air, noise, and light pollution. All of these changes impact park resources, from soil microbes to mountain lions and from historic objects to historic landscapes.

New problems, unheard of in the Leopold era, and a new scope: not just wildlife, but all natural and cultural resources under the care of NPS. The committee put forth a new, holistic vision of how parks should be cared for:

> Parks exist as coupled natural–human systems. Natural and cultural resource management must occur simultaneously and, in general, interdependently. Such resource management when practiced holistically embodies the basis of sound park stewardship. Artificial division of the National Park System into 'natural parks' and 'cultural parks' is ineffective and a detriment to successful resource management.

Instead of Leopold's "reasonable illusion of primitive America," *Revisiting Leopold* said that NPS "should make as its central resource policy the stewardship of park resources to preserve ecological integrity and cultural and historical authenticity" and "formally embrace the need to manage for change."

PROVOCATIONS

The malignancy of "white man's" impact, and its antidote: George Melendez Wright (1934)

The first scientist to work for NPS, George Melendez Wright inspired the founders of the GWS to name their new organization in honor of his farsighted contributions. Known for his winning personality, Wright was able to bring many people along with his vision of a scientifically informed system of national parks. But he was also unafraid to voice provocative opinions when he felt it necessary or warranted.

In 1934 he co-wrote (with Ben H. Thompson) the second in the famous *Fauna* series of scientific monographs about the parks. To that book he contributed a chapter on the problems of wildlife management, which is full of prescient observations like this:

> As the results of the failure of the parks to be self-contained, self-walled biological units, typical maladjustments are lack of winter range, ebb-flow of animals that are blacklisted outside the park areas, invasion by exotics, dilution of native species through hybridization, and exposure of natives to diseases and influences of alien faunas.

He went on to make some observations about the "incurable" problems of reconciling human interest with needs of wildlife. Then he offered this extraordinary passage:

> Though white man is in one sense part of the whole natural environment, one in the aggregate of faunal and floral species constituting the biota of the park, just as are the Indians who came via the Aleutians, and the grasses whose seeds were borne across the ocean, there are two things that set him apart even from other recent arrivals. White man's impact upon his environment is tremendous as compared to that of all other living forms. He is as much like them as cancerous growth is like normal growth and as destructive in effect.

Wright's cancer metaphor is startling on its own merits (it would not be developed further until 1955 when Alan Gregg, an officer with the Rockefeller Foundation responsible for international public health grants, suggested the same relationship in an article published in *Science*). Equally remarkable, though, is his sensitivity to the fact that indigenous peoples' impacts on the landscape, while undeniably large, were in no way comparable to those of Euroamerican immigrants.

But then Wright pivots the passage away from this dire reflection, and gives us a hint as to why his passion for the national parks ran so deep:

> The second thing which sets him apart and which is the antidote to the first, is his unique ability to appreciate his effect on the environment. He thus becomes capable of self-imposed restrictions to preserve other species against himself.... The whole national park idea is a manifestation of this second attribute of man. Admittedly, his object is a selfish one, just as it is when he chooses to destroy other species to use them for food, but it is a higher, more altruistic selfishness. It is selfishness for the benefit of all individuals of his own kind, and their descendants after them. And incidentally it is a selfishness which reacts beneficially upon the animals over which he holds power of destruction.

Outflanking the best of intentions: Walker Percy (1954)

Known primarily as a novelist with a philosophical bent, Walker Percy was continually interested in how and why things and places come to have a particular meaning for people. In an influential essay written in 1954 titled "The Loss of the Creature," Percy considers how hard it is to encounter a place for the first time and see it with completely fresh eyes, with no preconceptions. The Grand Canyon is his example:

> García López de Cárdenas discovered the Grand Canyon, and was amazed at the sight. It can be imagined: One crosses miles of desert, breaks through the mesquite, and there it is at one's feet. Later the government set the place aside as a national park, hoping to pass along to millions the experience of Cárdenas.

But he doubts that the Park Service can, in fact, mass-produce that sort of experience:

> The assumption is that the Grand Canyon is a remarkably interesting and beautiful place and that if it had a certain value *P* for Cárdenas, the same value may be transmitted to any number of sightseers.... It is assumed that since the Grand Canyon has a fixed interest value *P,* tours can be organized for any number of people. A man in Boston decides to spend his vacation at the Grand Canyon. He visits his travel bureau, looks at the folder, signs up for a two-week tour. He and his family take the tour, see the Grand Canyon, and return to Boston. May we say that this man has seen the Grand Canyon? Possibly he has. But it is more likely that what he has done is the one sure way not to see the canyon.

Percy argues that the tourist from Boston has not seen the canyon as it really is. Rather, his experience—unlike that of Cárdenas—is something preformulated. It may still be a pleasurable experience, but it is at best a step removed from how the Spanish explorer encountered the place. The sightseer, Percy says, measures his satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to his expectations. The opportunity for a novel encounter is gone.

What can people do to "recover the Grand Canyon"—that is, to recover the possibility of really seeing it as Cárdenas did? There are "any number of ways, all sharing in common the stratagem of avoiding the approved confrontation of the tour and the Park Service." One way is to get off the beaten track, avoid the tours and the trails and the interpretive signs at developed overlooks. In doing so, Percy thinks, "he sees the canyon by avoiding all the facilities for seeing the canyon." And, he continues, should "the benevolent Park Service" catch on and, enlightened agency that it is, wish to add its official blessing to *that* sort of behavior—perhaps by placing "the following notice in the Bright Angel Lodge: *Consult ranger for information on getting off the beaten track*—the end result will only be the closing of another access to the canyon"—the canyon as it really is.

Percy is challenging us to reconsider the basic, and usually unquestioned, role of the Park Service as intermediary between people and place. He is also indirectly questioning the assumption, almost sacrosanct, that the national park experience is somehow self-generatingly democratic, open to anyone so long as they are simply willing to follow the Park Service rules.

Restraint will set you free: Wallace Stegner (1955)

Wallace Stegner was a key combatant in the 1950s fight over plans to build a dam in Echo Park within Dinosaur National Monument. Writing *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,* his classic account of John Wesley Powell's explorations of the West, had made Stegner very familiar with the river canyons of Dinosaur's backcountry. Some have marked the battle over Echo Park as the beginning of the modern American environmental movement, and conservationists prevailed—against the odds—in no small part thanks to opposition worked up by David Brower and the Sierra Club. One of their most effective tools was a coffee-table book, *This is Dinosaur,* filled with stunning pictures of this little-known park, and animated by Stegner's words.

Places like Dinosaur are much-needed refuges from the too-much world of human striving. How much wilderness do wilderness-lovers want? he asked.

> The answer is easy: *Enough so that there will be in the years ahead a little relief, a little quiet, a little relaxation, for any of our increasing millions who need and want it.* That means we need as much wilderness as still can be saved.

For Stegner, wilderness was not to be saved because of its intrinsic value. It has none. "A place is nothing in itself," he declared. "It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist, except in terms of human perception, use, and response." Rather, places like Dinosaur can be saved only if we, the most powerful species of all, exercise self-restraint. The cardinal rule is Hippocratic: first, do no harm.

> It is legitimate to hope that there may [be] in Dinosaur the special kind of human mark, the special record of human passage, that distinguishes man from all other species. It is simply the deliberate and chosen refusal to make any marks at all. Sometimes we have withheld our power to destroy, and have left threatened species like the buffalo, a threatened beauty spot like Yosemite or Yellowstone or Dinosaur, scrupulously alone. We are the most dangerous species of life on the planet, and every other species, even the earth itself, has cause to fear our power to exterminate. But we are also the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy.

Soon after *This is Dinosaur*'s publication in the spring of 1955, every member of Congress found a copy on his or her desk. And soon after that, plans for the dam which might have destroyed Dinosaur were dropped.

Not instruction but provocation: Freeman Tilden (1957)

Freeman Tilden was not the first great interpreter in the National Park Service, but even three decades after his death he is still the most influential. His 1957 book *Interpreting Our Heritage* has never lost its influence as a touchstone for the agency. Tilden's six principles of interpretation, covering its nature, aims, and essential practices, are still a central part of NPS interpretive training. At the apex of these principles is this pronouncement: "The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation."

> Not the least of the fruits of adequate interpretation is the certainty that it leads directly toward the very preservation of the treasure itself, whether it be a national park, a prehistoric ruin, a historic battlefield, or a precious monument of our wise and heroic ancestors. Indeed, such a result may be the most important end of our interpretation, for what we cannot protect we are destined to lose. I find in the park service administrative manual a concise and profound statement, and my heartiest thanks go to whoever it was that phrased it: 'Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.'
>
> I would have every interpreter, everywhere, recite this to himself frequently almost like a canticle of praise to the Great Giver of all we have, for in the realest sense it is a suggestion of the religious spirit, the spiritual urge, the satisfaction of which must always be the finest end product of our preserved natural and man-made treasures.

After a million years of neglect, progress arrives: Edward Abbey (1968)

An icon of American radical environmentalism, beloved by many and reviled by many more, Ed Abbey did stints as a seasonal ranger at Arches, Casa Grande Ruins, Organ Pipe Cactus, and Everglades. A devoted student and practitioner of anarchism, Abbey was both attracted to and repulsed by the federal government as keeper of public lands. In the preface to one of his most famous books, *Desert Solitaire,* he wrote:

> Regrettably I have found it unavoidable to write some harsh words about my seasonal employer the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, United State Government. Even the Government itself has not entirely escaped censure. I wish to point out therefore that the Park Service has labored under severe pressure from powerful forces for many decades and that under the circumstances and so far it has done its work rather well. As governmental agencies go the Park Service is a good one, and better than most. This I attribute not to the administrators of the Park Service—like administrators everywhere they are distinguished chiefly by their ineffable mediocrity—but to the actual working rangers and naturalists in the field, the majority of whom are capable, honest, dedicated men.

Abbey celebrated Utah's desert solitude in a dumpy Park Service trailer for two seasons at Arches in the late 1950s. One day, though, it all came to an end when two road engineers showed up in a dusty Jeep, armed with surveying equipment and news of big development plans for Arches. Revisiting the park a few years later, he ruefully reported, "all that was foretold has come to pass."

> Where once a few adventurous people came on weekends to camp for a night or two and enjoy a taste of the primitive and remote, you will now find serpentine streams of baroque automobiles pouring in and out.... The campgrounds where I used to putter around reading three-day-old newspapers full of lies and watermelon seeds have now been consolidated into one master campground that looks, during the busy season, like a suburban village; elaborate housetrailers of quilted aluminum crowd upon gigantic camper-trucks of Fiberglas and molded plastic; through their windows you will see the blue glow of television and hear the studio laughter of Los Angeles.... Down at the beginning of the new road, at park headquarters, is the new entrance station and visitor center, where admission fees are collected and where rangers are quietly going nuts answering the same three basic questions five hundred times a day: (1) Where's the john? (2) How long's it take to see this place? (3) Where's the Coke machine?
>
> Progress has come at last to the Arches, after a million years of neglect. Industrial Tourism has arrived.

"Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People": The Alcatraz Takeover (1969–1971)

In November 1969 a group of American Indians representing several tribes chartered a boat to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay to claim it for Native people. The occupiers cited treatment under the government's Indian termination policy and numerous broken treaties as reasons for their action. They said they took over the island with the aim of building several facilities devoted to Native American culture and ecology.

To announce their action to the world, the activists issued a "Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People," printed here in its entirety:

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery.

We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars ($24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that $24 in trade goods for these 16 acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of $1.24 per acre is greater than the 47¢ per acre that the white men are now paying the California Indians for their land. We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of that land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian Affairs [sic] and by the bureau of Caucasian Affairs to hold in perpetuity—for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea. We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men.

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian Reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

The protesters and their successors ended up occupying the island for 19 months until, finally, they were forcibly removed.

According to historian Troy Johnson, "The underlying goals of the Indians on Alcatraz were to awaken the American public to the reality of the plight of the first Americans and to assert the need for Indian self-determination. As a result of the occupation, either directly or indirectly, the official government policy of termination of Indian tribes was ended and a policy of Indian self-determination became the official US government policy." In 2011 a permanent multimedia exhibit on the occupation was opened on Alcatraz, which is now part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. NPS now acknowledges this episode of American Indian protest prominently, and recently Alcatraz was the site of a temporary installation of work by the prominent dissident Chinese artist and human rights activist Ai Weiwei.

Recognizing women's rights, then and now: Judy Hart (1980)

The National Park Service has an uncomfortable history when it comes to the role of women, as documented by Polly Welts Kaufman in *National Parks and the Women's Voice*. Although women were tolerated as seasonal employees, helpmate wives of superintendents, and anthropologists in certain southwestern monuments, they were not generally admitted to professional positions until the 1960s.

Judy Hart, first superintendent of Women's Rights National Historical Park, is representative of a generation of NPS professionals who began to press for women's equality within the agency and greater recognition of women's history at national parks. In a 2008 interview, she recalled entering the NPS in the late 1970s, when women rangers were protesting the NPS policy of gendered uniforms: "That was a boiling pot for the whole Park Service…. [O]ther organizations in the country had moved along a little faster with the appearance of equality." As a new legislative specialist for the North Atlantic Region, she was tasked with developing proposals for new-area studies of places that qualified for inclusion in the national park system.

> So I went to the files, and there were two things in there; there was a home of a general, so I asked around and nobody knew what war he'd been in. I thought, 'This is ridiculous; we don't know why he's in here.' As I recall, the other had something to do with Mark Twain, but ... it wasn't a site that was central to his life. I thought about it for a while, and I thought, why don't we do something that has to do with women?

With support from the regional office, Hart approached Peggy Lipson, her counterpart in the WASO (Washington headquarters) legislative office, for assistance in identifying sites. Lipson was willing but anticipated some resistance from the agency. She counseled that only places already designated as national landmarks had a realistic chance of being considered for park status. They found two good prospects: the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, New York, and the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House in Seneca Falls, New York. After several rounds of internal discussion and consultation with local and state preservationists, Hart and landscape architect Shary Berg, who had worked on the preservation of Val-Kill (Eleanor Roosevelt's home), made a reconnaissance trip in December 1978.

They first stopped at the Anthony House in Rochester. To their surprise, the members of the Susan B. Anthony Memorial, which had owned and operated it as a house museum for more than thirty years, were not interested in national park status. "Then we went to the Stanton House. We hadn't even gotten out of the car [before] we were met by the welcoming group, maybe eight people.… They all wanted to share with us how excited they were." Hart, too, became excited about the Stanton House and even the Wesleyan Chapel, which had been altered almost to oblivion and was then being used as a laundromat with apartments above.

> ... the Stanton House was a bit of a challenge, and the Wesleyan Chapel was a complete disaster, from the perspective of the Park Service, because a big part of national significance is retaining integrity, and there is no way you could say Wesleyan Chapel retained its integrity.... Shary argued vehemently that we should not finish the study and submit it, that it just did not fit as a national park. I argued vehemently on the other side and said this was clearly a nationally significant story.... Women didn't happen to always do their history in magnificent, glorious architectural gems, and they weren't always preserved, and that's part of the story. I always felt that the history of what happened in the Wesleyan Chapel was extremely important ... [and] the fact that it wasn't honored as a place of a major event in women's history.

The regional office agreed with Hart, as did the Washington office, and the new-area study resulted in a bill to create Women's Rights National Historical Park, introduced early in 1980 by New York Senator Patrick Moynihan and New York Representative Jonathan Bingham. The bill quickly passed the House, then stalled in the Senate. But there was tremendous support on the Hill.

> There were a couple of things that propelled it, in my observation. I was allowed and encouraged to go down repeatedly and do presentations on Capitol Hill and talk to anyone who was willing to talk to me.... Professional women aides were pretty new [then], but they were, as tends to happen, very well connected and networked. They worked and talked to each other all the time, and there was a great buzz about this park. As soon as word got out, they loved the idea. I was never privy to all the inner workings of things, but I couldn't go anyplace that they hadn't already heard about it. I'd go in and set up a slide show and people would come—that was just a major mark of honor, when you're on the Hill, given all they have to pay attention to.

The Senate finally held a hearing in September, then nothing happened until Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in November. The Seneca Falls contingent, however, had been lobbying Senator Moynihan mercilessly. After Reagan was elected,

> Everybody was trying to get their piece of legislation enacted during that Congress.... Sen. Moynihan got the subcommittee to vote on it, and the full Senate to vote on it December 13. I was in Canada for the Christmas holiday when I heard that Jimmy Carter had signed it on December 28 ... with a broken collarbone. I know they

> have auto-signature machines very sophisticated at that level—but I always pictured his staff kind of holding his elbow and pushing his arm around so he could sign it.

"No, national parks are not America's best idea": Alan Spears (2016)

The cultural resources director for the National Parks Conservation Association, Alan Spears posted an article under this title to the "African American Explorations" blog in February of this year. A long-term employee of NPCA, Spears grew up in southeast Washington, DC, across the street from the NPS-run Fort Dupont Park, as part of a family that made annual summer pilgrimages to Gettysburg. "I think it would be fair to say that America's national parks mean a great deal to me," he writes. But Spears is troubled by the ad nauseam repetition of the slogan "The national parks are America's best idea"; they are not, he says, "and describing them as such may be preventing us from creating and sustaining the diverse constituency our national parks need to survive and thrive in their second century."

> Any African American worth his or her salt will tell you that national parks don't crack the top 10 list of best ideas. The Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1965, respectively, all occupy a higher place in the order of best ideas than our national parks. Gay men and lesbians probably feel the same way about the recent and long overdue Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality. Asian Pacific Islander Americans might add to this burgeoning list the repeal of racist exclusionary laws. For women, it may be the passage of the 19th Amendment.

Spears points out that the "best idea" language might actually alienate people:

> Park enthusiasts moved to hyperbole by the majestic splendor of our National Park System often fail to see the arrogance at the heart of the 'best idea' sentiment. It's the assumption that those who don't get national parks have failed to embrace a universal concept. That they (we) need to be converted into believers not for the sake of park protection but to improve shoddy lives not yet blessed by a visit to Old Faithful.

Instead of lionizing them, Spears suggests that we regard national parks as "an ever-evolving concept filled with great promise" but also "in need of constant stewardship." He believes people of color and from other underrepresented groups are ready to help create a more perfect national park system, but "only if we can have an honest discussion about when, where and why we enter the national parks movement, and where those magnificent sites fit into the long list of America's best ideas."

VISIONS

Embracing the future: The first nationwide recreation study (1941)

In 1941 the Department of the Interior published *A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem of the United States,* the most comprehensive survey of the topic yet undertaken. With a foreword by Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes, it was very much a product of

the New Deal and its emphasis on centralized planning. It concluded with a recreational plan for the whole country. The plan is notable for recognizing that the United States was rapidly changing, with more and more people moving to cities and suburbs, all of whom needed outlets for play and relaxation.

The plan was extraordinarily ambitious in seeking to reach *all* people regardless of class or income:

> Every element and all types of population need areas and facilities for outdoor recreation. There is a paramount need, however, for public recreational areas, of all obtainable types and providing for a wide range of beneficial activities, within easy reach of all urban populations. Theirs is a daily life, lived among man-reared walls, man-built streets, objectionable noises and smells, and, for a large percentage of them, in poor housing. To provide what they need for frequent use requires:
>
> (a) Neighborhood playgrounds within easy walking distance (not more than a quarter of a mile) of all children.
>
> (b) Playfields and neighborhood centers within half a mile to a mile of all citizens.
>
> (c) Parks, or other areas characterized by natural or man-made beauty, sufficient in extent so that wear and tear will not be such as to render the cost of maintenance of their attractive features prohibitive, and sufficient in number and so distributed that all citizens, no matter how poor, may enjoy them at least occasionally. The limit of distance for areas of this type probably should not exceed two miles.
>
> (d) Protection of urban and suburban streams and other waters from pollution and 'uglifying' uses; provision of points of access and facilities for use in such places and of such extent as prospective use will justify.
>
> (e) Parkways along waterways and to connect major units of the recreational-area system.

The study helped set the stage for Mission 66, the expansion of urban parks under the Hartzog directorship, and, later, the Park Service's present-day cooperative programs (for which see Denis P. Galvin's NPS Centennial Essay in this issue).

The signs of where we came from: *With Heritage So Rich* (1966)

Many people consider the country's most far-reaching historic preservation law to be the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. It created the National Register of Historic Places, the National Historic Landmarks program, the requirement that federal agencies evaluate the impact on historic and archaeological sites of all projects they carry out or issue permits for (Section 106 review), and the system of state historic preservation offices and officers

(SHPOs). The primary direct influence on the act was the publication, a few months previously, of a special report titled *With Heritage So Rich*. The report mixed essays, poetry, photography, and, critically, policy recommendations. All of these recommendations were incorporated into the law.

With Heritage So Rich originated in the 1964 United States Conference of Mayors. The conference, alarmed by the widespread loss of historic sites to "urban renewal" projects, convened a special committee to report on the situation nationally. The committee, some of whose members had been involved in drafting the landmark Venice Charter in 1964, began by touring eight European countries to search for international precedents to guide a new approach to historic preservation in the US.

One of the contributors was Sidney Hyman, an author and speechwriter for President Kennedy. Hyman had been one of the original students in Robert Maynard Hutchins' Great Books program at the University of Chicago. He used that training to provide a big-picture context for historic preservation in his essay, "Empire for Liberty." The wholesale clearing of historic structures and even whole neighborhoods to make way for freeways and other infrastructure, far from increasing the level of order in society, can actually threaten it:

> A nation can be a victim of amnesia. It can lose the memories of what it was, and thereby lose the sense of what it is or wants to be. It can say it is being 'progressive' when it rips up the tissues which visibly bind one strand of its history to the next. It can say it is only getting rid of 'junk' in order to make room for the modern. What it often does instead, once it has lost the graphic source of its memories, is to break the perpetual partnership that makes for orderly growth in the life of a society.

It is, Hyman thought, this strange, wonderful partnership between the people of the past and those of the present that provides the continuity which must be the basis of any notion of national identity.

> What we want to conserve, therefore, is the evidence of individual talent and tradition, of liberty and union among successive generations of Americans. We want the signs of where we came from and how we got to where we are, the thoughts that we had along the way and what we did to express the thoughts in action. We want to know the trails that were walked, the battles that were fought, the tools that were made. We want to know the beautiful or useful things that were built and the originality that was shown, the adaptations that were made and the grace-notes to life that were sounded. We want to know the experiments in community living that were tried and the lessons that were taught by a brave failure as well as by a brave success. It is all these things and more like them that we want to keep before our eyes as part of our lived life as a people, and as connecting links between a past which millions of Americans helped make and a future we must continue to make.

The fruits of *With Heritage So Rich* go beyond the National Historic Preservation Act. The book continues to be a touchstone for American historic preservation today, 50 years after it was published.

From memory to action: Creating a coalition of sites of conscience (2000)

In December 1999, representatives from nine historic site museums (led by New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum) met in Bellagio, Italy, and decided to form the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, now known simply as the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Sites of conscience define their mission in terms of (1) interpreting history through historic sites; (2) engaging in public programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues; (3) promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and (4) sharing opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site. They explore issues such as racism, sexism, totalitarianism, immigration, forced removal, and genocide. Today, the coalition has more than 200 members that adhere to the four principles noted above. Members include actual places (memorials, historic sites, museums), memory initiatives (group efforts that publicly remember an event), and nongovernmental organizations.

NPS played a key role in the founding meeting, and one of its leading representatives was Marie Rust, the director of the Northeast Region. After her return, she briefed Director Robert Stanton on how the meeting had fired the imaginations of those who participated:

> It is safe to say that the participating site directors came without high expectations. They arrived simply content to share program ideas and experience with other like minded institutions. They left having formed the basis of a potentially powerful coalition promoting a new role for historic sites in the world. We look forward to the day when visitors to historic sites will learn not only the history of that site but be involved in dialogue concerning the contemporary implications of the issues raised there ... and emerge as better citizens for having had the experience. In this view, historic sites become places of engagement and partners in the process of building and sustaining democracies.

"Reaching across boundaries of nation, political systems, race, and language, these discussions inspired an outpouring of support and generosity," Rust reported, resulting in the group deciding "unanimously and unequivocally to form an International Coalition to strengthen each participating site and empower emerging sites around the world."

NPS also played an important role in introducing the new coalition to the press and public in the United States by helping organize a weeklong tour in May 2000. In a press release announcing the tour, Rust said:

> These museums feature controversial moments in history that people around the world are remembering and showcasing. Our stories can inform and guide our visiting public not to repeat the mistakes of the past, but to apply lessons learned towards improving the future. No story exists in isolation. The stories we tell at Women's Rights, Independence, Gettysburg, Ellis Island and throughout the National Park System have international relevance and need to be portrayed within the whole context of world history. Working together in an international network, we will be far more effective than working on our own.

Today, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience remains "dedicated to transforming places that preserve the past into dynamic spaces that promote civic action on today's struggles for human rights and justice." As the coalition notes, millions of people visit memorials every day, and many use such spaces to express or discover personal connections to political issues. Sites of conscience can be safe outlets for people to come together and make civic choices that shape and sustain democracy.

A pact between generations: Rethinking National Parks for the 21st Century (2001)

"The creation of a national park is an expression of faith in the future. It is a pact between generations, a promise from the past to the future." With these words, the National Park System Advisory Board opened its 2001 report *Rethinking National Parks for the 21st Century.* Chaired by the historian John Hope Franklin, the board was responding to a request from Director Stanton for a broad-brush look at the purposes and prospects for the national park system over the first quarter of the new century.

The tenor of the report is to acknowledge the successes and popularity of the parks while pushing for even loftier standards and aims. Ninety-five percent of the public may approve of the parks; nonetheless, "[i]t is time to re-examine the 'enjoyment equals support' equation and to encourage public support of resource protection at a higher level of understanding." The agency, too, needs a spur: it is "beloved and respected, yes; but perhaps too cautious, too resistant to change, too reluctant to engage the challenges that must be addressed in the 21st century." The report made eight recommendations (quoted verbatim here). NPS should:

- Embrace its mission, as educator, to become a more significant part of America's educational system by providing formal and informal programs for students and learners of all ages inside and outside park boundaries.
- Encourage the study of the American past, developing programs based on current scholarship, linking specific places to the narrative of our history, and encouraging a public exploration and discussion of the American experience.
- Adopt the conservation of biodiversity as a core principle in carrying out its preservation mandate and participate in efforts to protect marine as well as terrestrial resources.
- Advance the principles of sustainability, while first practicing what is preached.
- Actively acknowledge the connections between native cultures and the parks, and assure that no relevant chapter in the American heritage experience remains unopened.
- Encourage collaboration among park and recreation systems at every level—Federal, regional, state, local—in order to help build an outdoor recreation network accessible to all Americans.
- Improve the Service's institutional capacity by developing new organizational talents and abilities and a workforce that reflects America's diversity.

Since 2001 progress has been made toward all eight recommendations, but every single one is still on NPS's agenda. And they likely will be for the foreseeable future. The board probably sensed this. "The National Park Service has a twenty-first century responsibility of great importance," they concluded. "It is to proclaim anew the meaning and value of parks,

conservation, and recreation; to expand the learning and research occurring in parks and share that knowledge broadly; and to encourage all Americans to experience these special places."

> As a people, our quality of life—our very health and well-being—depends in the most basic way on the protection of nature, the accessibility of open space and recreation opportunities, and the preservation of landmarks that illustrate our historic continuity. By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.

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